Bridging the cultural gaps: Collaborative and reflective practice

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Abstract

Adjusting to study at university is difficult for all students as they find themselves in the 'shifting sands' of a new learning context where their existing assumptions and expectations of teaching and learning are challenged. However, for international students studying in New Zealand the adjustment is more difficult because they have to adapt to the different cultural and education context. This article describes the collaborative and reflective teaching practices that underpinned a series of school based, discrete workshops provided by Student Learning Advisors at The University of Waikato. The heterogeneous group of international students were studying at different levels from first year undergraduate, to postgraduate and masters degree and therefore had differing learning needs. A supportive and collegial learning environment developed as the series progressed and the student became familiar with the university and the educational context. That environment and the content of the workshops contributed to the development of 'firm foundations' in academic literacy and learning processes, and the development of graduate attributes.

Introduction

"I know nothing about sheep". These words were uttered by an international student who had recently arrived in New Zealand to study at postgraduate level. She was almost in despair over the task of summarising academic journal articles, each rich in language, content, and culture. In the article that gave her particular trouble the author used the culturally-based metaphor of drafting sheep to introduce the idea that once the education system streams learners, their destiny is self-fulfilling. Culturally grounded literature was just one of the challenges that faced the group of students who attended the co-taught series of workshops. English was the second language for all the students who attended and most were studying at postgraduate but had not studied at tertiary level for some time, while others were first year undergraduates. The series was designed to steady the 'shifting sands' as they adapted to the university environment and the content focused on developing academic literacy and the transferable learning processes required for success in university study. Also, the graduate attributes that would be applicable to their roles in the community when their study was completed were modelled and made explicit. This paper presents a case

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study of a series of co-taught workshops taught by two Learning Advisors and underpinned by reflective practice.

Background

Although the concept of collaborative teaching tends to be contrary to the culture of individualism that presides (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001), we chose to co-teach in order to draw on each other's strengths and experience and because this approach benefits students. Our decision was fully supported within our unit despite the extra time involved in the collaborative process of planning, agreeing on resources and reflecting on each workshop in order to address the emerging needs of the learners. However, the content and resources developed are adaptable for future workshops and for eventual use in the eLearning environment our unit is developing. Because we were able to choose to work with a peer who shared our teaching goals and philosophy other possible disadvantages of co-teaching such as power struggles between the teachers or confused learners because of lack of consistency in planning and delivery, were avoided (Bailey et al., 2001).

Co-teaching the workshops provided opportunities for peer observation, self reflection and professional growth. Underpinning our presentation of the discrete workshops in the series was 'reflection-in-practice' with each workshop reshaped, while in process, in response to student interaction (Farrell, 1998; Schon, 1987). Following each workshop we met to 'reflect-on-action' which provided an opportunity to reframe content and presentation and to plan the following workshop in response to observed student needs. However, for reflective practice to be valid it must combine both 'experiential knowledge' gained during teaching practice, and 'received knowledge' based on theory and informed by research (Wallace, 1990). Co-teaching provided depth in each of these aspects as our strengths and knowledge were combined. Another benefit of this collaborative practice was that during the process of peer observation, the students' responses to the teaching style and the content was noted and then integrated into the teaching context as the series progressed.

Initially research into the series of workshops was not considered as a possibility. Our goal was to provide flexible and responsive learning development opportunities that would enable the students and assist them to bridge the cultural gap within their new environment. However, as the series progressed and during the process of planning, we recognised that we were critically combining reflection and practitioner research in order to improve our professional practice (Altrichter, Feldman, Posch & Somekh, 2008). That is, our case study fits the criteria of practical action research which Altrichter et al. (2008) describe as practitioners making opportunities to reflect and critique their work in order to make changes and to share their experiences with colleagues without grappling with underlying ideologies. Throughout the series we questioned our own and each other's practice in order to find better ways of assisting the students to bridge the gaps and steady the 'shifting sands'. However, the central focus remained reflection-on-practice in order to respond to the emerging needs of the

students and to empower them in their learning. The result was a series of discrete workshops that were responsive to the emergent needs of the multi-cultural group of international students.

The learners

The majority of the learners who attended the workshops were from the Pacific and they were all mature, well qualified and experienced professionals in their field of study. However, because they had not undertaken study for some time or at this university, they faced social and academic challenges similar to 'first year experience' students (Grace & Gravestock, 2009). Further, students returning to study, after even a relatively short space of time, find there are shifts in the discipline content and in the academic literacy skills required for success. For instance, in the space of five years, the widespread use of information technology within courses at our university has led to the introduction of new literacy practices, procedures and new assessment methods, which are an added challenge for students (Henderson & Hirst, 2007). Also, although the students had attended a short and useful orientation course prior to entering university, it could only provide them with a generalised overview of the context in which they were to study and the requirements of the New Zealand education system. One of the benefits of the series of workshops was that there were opportunities to respond to the students as new challenges emerged.

Most of the learners were intrinsically motivated and well prepared for study in a foreign country but others were not. Through observation of the learners and their conversations we identified students who were initially disorientated by the differences between the new environment and education in their home country. Some were also distracted by personal and social factors involved in living in another culture and they appeared to progress through the stages of acculturation before adapting (Brown, 2000). As Barkhuizen (2004) states, there are numerous variables that contribute to the expectations a student has of the new country, including culturally based prior learning and Brown (2000, p. 183) identifies "world view, self identity, and systems of thinking, acting, feeling and communicating" as being disrupted when entering a new culture. These variables can contribute to miscommunication between the learners and lecturer (Reinders, Lewis & Kirkness, 2006**),** and further add to the learners' discomfort. The students' discomfort was exacerbated, within the university environment and socially, by the difficulties they had decoding culturally-based metaphors, colloquialisms, and native speaker body language. The workshops helped to reduce these effects by responding to academic literacy needs and providing a forum for discussion and supportive collegiality amongst the students. Indeed, one student shared with us that, although he found the content of the workshops helpful, his motivation for attending was because his study was fully on-line and he felt solated from the academic community.

The teaching approach

Given the mix of nationalities, genders, ages and levels of study, preferred ways of learning varied within the group and in response, our teaching style aimed to create a

classroom environment where differences were recognised and valued. Rather than transmitting knowledge, the style was a mix of 'explainer': answering questions and providing students with insights; 'involver': using resources that encouraged opportunities for interaction; and 'enabler': responding to the classroom context and creating opportunities for the learners to learn for themselves (Schrivener, 1994). Most of all we endeavoured to build a non-threatening learning environment by drawing on three core teaching characteristics: 'respect' for the students as adults with previous experiences; 'empathy' through looking at the cultural gaps from the students perspective; and 'authenticity' by working as a co-adult rather than a teacher (Bailey et al., 2001; Schrivener, 1994). The combination of these attributes added value to the development of a collegial environment within the workshops, especially when combined with reflective and collaborative practice.

Our teaching model was an eclectic mix of 'complementary co-teaching' with each contributing to and complementing the other's practice, and 'team teaching' which included sharing the planning and presentation of the workshops (Nevin, Thousand & Villa, 2009). We also shared informal and continual assessment of the students' progress and of emerging needs identified through observation and reflection. Synergies developed as a result of bringing together our different perspectives, ideas, activities and knowledge (Conderman & McCarty, 2003), and enabled us to model transferable skills including, analytical and critical thinking and responding to and extending ideas. We also introduced and challenged different perspectives within the classroom. The non-evaluative observations that developed through our co-teaching relationship allowed us to "see again or see differently, the events of a lesson and reconstruct [our] understanding" (Malderez & Bodoczky, 1999, p. 19). In effect, a reciprocal mentoring and informal professional development relationship evolved, benefiting both the advisors and the students.

It is easy to suggest that motivation, intrinsic and/or extrinsic, underpins student success at university, but the constructivist view recognises there are underlying expectations that must first be met. That is, until students feel secure and identify with the learning context, their full potential will not be reached (Brown, 2000; Maslow, 1970). During a workshop discussion the students commented that they felt uncomfortable asking questions of the lecturer, and one student explained: "We don't know what we don't know so we don't know what to ask". He then added "… the lecturers don't know what we don't know so they don't know what to tell us". Johnson's (2008) findings were similar when international students reported that when they do not understand the lecturer, they ask a friend or another student for clarification rather than approach the lecturer. As students identified such difficulties our response was to emphasise appropriate processes to assist them to negotiate social practices within the university context (Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode & Kocatepe, 2004). Misunderstanding of the university culture, lack of content knowledge and hesitancy to question are distinct barriers to learning development and once identified provided insights into the type of activities that would benefit the students in the workshops. One such insight was the realisation that one student had taken the

concept of ‘independent learning’ literally to mean she must be self motivated and work without any assistance at all, which led to her isolation from academic stimulation.

The workshops

A framework of topics for the workshop series was developed well in advance of the semester and in conjunction with the school’s international co-ordinators. The selection of topics was based on experience of student needs gained during individual meetings, previous workshops, the literature and gaps identified by lecturers. Student attendance was optional, although it was encouraged by the international co-ordinators; that is, students self-selected which workshops to attend and there was no assessment. As a result, attendance varied depending on the topic, although a core group of students met regularly with the consequence that at any one workshop there could be ten different nationalities represented, bringing a vibrant mix of culture and language. We found that through co-teaching within a subject area, rather than sole-teaching cross-discipline workshops in generic skills, we were able to tailor activities in response to the students’ emerging needs.

Active learning

In recognition that people have different learning style preferences and to ensure that we did not merely teach in the way we preferred to learn, the workshop activities were varied (Grace & Gravestock, 2009). In particular, the focus was on actively talking and writing in order to explore ideas; for example, the students deconstructed and reconstructed texts to highlight embedded literary devices and to identify rhetorical contexts (Bean, 1996). These and other active learning opportunities allowed students to develop their academic literacy but also helped them, and us, identify their learning strengths and how these could contribute to academic success (Bean, 1996). This was evident in the simulated debate instigated to demonstrate the development of an academic argument. The Pasifika students presented a compelling argument in support of their position and showed their cohesive teamwork, oral fluency and the ability to respond spontaneously and effectively with little preparation. The same debate effectively provided a learning opportunity for those students who needed help in structuring arguments and orally planning and communicating within a group. The similarities between the debating process and developing an argument in a written academic essay were made explicit, thus demonstrating the transferability of skills and processes.

Another multidimensional outcome resulted from the SWOB (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and barriers) analysis, an adaptation of the SWOT analysis framework. This activity required students to reflect on the previous weeks of study and identify their strengths, the things that did not go so well, the opportunities there were for improvement in the future and how to overcome any barriers to success they identified. The activity culminated in their setting goals for the coming weeks. Through this process each student made their achievements explicit and this provided them with reassurance at a time when assignment deadlines were pressing and causing

some stress. Another activity included the evaluation of a seminar presented poorly by an 'expert'. Using a framework, the students were encouraged to critique and thus break down the barrier of perceiving experts or published authors as being above criticism. Initially we observed that the students were uncomfortable and inhibited about providing this feedback, but with encouragement they found they had the knowledge and skills to analyse information and make judgments. The activity provided the opportunity to focus on the difference between criticism and being critical in an academic sense, and highlighted that the questioning of lecturers and academic texts is an integral aspect of academic study.

The underlying objective of the active learning activities was the development of transferable processes and attributes, especially the concepts of thinking reflectively, analytically and critically. Our teaching approach included modelling reflection and questioning, and encouraging students to become involved in the learning process in order to become more self-directed and independent, as is required for success in a western university environment. Consequently, we used every opportunity to make explicit the transferable skills that were being modelled and provide spontaneous verbal reinforcement that showed students their contributions were valued. As the students were from the same school of study, authentic resources could be utilised for each of the activities and they provided the students with opportunities for discussion and the development of content and contextual knowledge.

Evaluation

As reflective practitioners we continually subjected our practice and intrinsic beliefs to informal summative evaluation based on reflection during and after the workshops and peer observation (Cunningham Florez, 2001; Farrell, 1998). This practice underpinned the evaluation of whether our collaborative approach was effective and led to the continual refocusing of content and resources to meet the students' learning needs. As there were no assessment activities to evaluate students' progress during the series, informal assessment was important in gauging the students' responses to the programme. However, a strong indication that the content was useful and the environment comfortable, was that student attendance was regular. Alternatively, because attendance was voluntary if the workshops not met their needs they would have voted with their feet. Following each workshop PowerPoint slides were forwarded to those present, providing the students with a record on which to reflect independently and in their own time. A typical comment from a student in the official confidential summative evaluation was: "[In] the workshops I attended we did class discussions and activities, had a PowerPoint and were emailed the ppp which was great". Another student also referred to the benefit of the handouts saying, "The notes are useful for current tasks and for later retrieval".

Other comments gathered from the summative evaluation survey were positive. A student commented that "The workshops were important for my studies as I previously completed my studies 6 years ago", reinforcing the benefit of the series for 'first year

experience' students. With regard to the content, a comment was "It is useful for my assignment and I learn a lot on how to write a good critique". Answers to questions about the teaching practice included, "The facilitators were always ready and gave authentic examples we could relate to"; and "The tutors are very helpful and good at explanation". Another student commented "there was collaborativeness with the two facilitior [sic]". Indicating the importance of the teaching approach to the students, comments included: "They were great, friendly and understanding of our needs"; and "They have time to listen and time to share knowledge and if not clear, after the workshop, we could ask questions". Consequently, we conclude that this on-going workshop series provided a comfortable learning environment and a supportive learning community based on the commonalities of subject area, and English as a second language. The series also contributed to the students' understanding of the university environment as indicated by the comment: "Yes, the work has helped very much to understand what learning is in New Zealand".

The official evaluation also asked the students if there were any topic they would like included in the workshops and there were a number of suggestions which were introduced in the following series. One student commented "I would like individual time with the facilitator on my personal needs" and to counter this we instigated a drop-in session following each workshop where students can meet with a Learning Advisor for 15 minutes. We have noted that this time is also used for student to student conversations further encouraging collegiality and support among the peer group. In the future, evaluation and feedback could be gained through a focus group thus extending the opportunity for student input. However, at the time of writing this paper a colleague is observing during workshops and will interview students as part of a study of student engagement. This will provide research-based feedback and suggestions for future direction.

Conclusion

Our practical action research indicates that the collaboratively and reflectively co-taught series of workshops assisted students to bridge the gap into the university community and to meet the institution's expectations. The 'sheep drafting metaphor' is just one example of culturally-based content that created difficulties for the international students as they adjusted to studying in the university environment in a new country. This was countered by the flexibility of our approach which enabled us to respond to emergent needs and model the skills and attributes that are valued in a western institution. As Nunan and Lamb (1996) suggest, students are more likely to develop autonomy when teachers model that process and co-teaching provided opportunities for such demonstrations. In relation to our professional development, collaborative teaching created an opportunity for informal mentoring by a trusted colleague. Also, the combining of experiences and expertise with reflective practice contributed to our on-going professional development as Learning Advisors. The conclusion is also drawn that the co-taught embedded series of workshops contributed to the steadying of the 'shifting sands' in the students' new learning context and reduced the isolation of the 'first year experience'.

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